

ADVOCACY

on the FRONT LINES of CTE

BY SUSAN REESE

Career and technical education (CTE) in the 21st century is more relevant and rigorous than ever before. It prepares students to compete in the global workplace, it inspires lifelong learning, and it helps prevent at-risk students from dropping out of school because it keeps them engaged in the learning process. Those who work on the front lines of CTE know this, but not all of the stakeholders in our communities do. That's why advocacy is so important, and career and technical educators are using many tools and strategies to share our message.

Student Advocates Share the Message

Studies have shown that those who have the strongest influence on high school and middle school students are most often their peers, so CTE programs are enlisting their own students in getting out the message about the benefits of CTE. For example, Ohio's Miami Valley Career Technology Center sends student ambassadors to each of its associate high schools each fall to talk about the center's programs, and to answer questions the potential new students may have. About

two years ago, another Ohio school, Great Oaks Career Campuses, began a student advocate program that provides an opportunity for its students to work with a local marketing agency. They create, plan and execute a marketing campaign to not only end the misperceptions about CTE, but to educate the community about the great things that Great Oaks does for the students who attend its four campuses.

"We wanted to find a way to harness the power of word-of-mouth communication to give potential students the inside story about career and technical education and Great Oaks directly from their peers," says Jon Weidlich, community relations director for the Great Oaks Career Campuses. "Once we knew what we wanted, we partnered with Walch Communications, a local marketing company, to help develop the program."

Five or six students were chosen from each of the four Great Oaks campuses, and Weidlich and his team met with them during the first year as they brainstormed and planned ways to reach their fellow students. As a result, Weidlich said, "They came up with three activities: a Facebook page, a blog and a district-wide contest that would encourage other students to

tell their stories. That year was really just a planning year; we worked internally through a number of issues, such as how we give students the control they need to talk freely on social media while still protecting the district's needs. This school year is when it all came together. The plans were in place, the students were enthusiastic, and, coincidentally, Walch Communications brought in a new associate who, as it turns out, was a former Great Oaks employee with marketing experience and a passion for the district."

The students in the Great Oaks Student Advocate Program are tasked with enlisting current and past students, teachers, parents, counselors and employers to share their success stories. According to Great Oaks, the program is intended to create a robust and sustainable network of Great Oaks advocates, increase peer-to-peer word-of-mouth referrals (such as parent-to-parent or student-to-student), and put Great Oaks' success into focus. The school sees this as a way to improve its image and the perception of it within the community, as well as increase enrollment and new student engagement.

The program places a lot of responsibility on students who are chosen as



ILLUSTRATION BY ISTOCK.COM

student advocates; they are, after all, the public face of the program, attending community events and engaging with key stakeholders. It begins with training to develop their marketing and communications skills. From there, the student advocates are given wide latitude to develop outreach initiatives.

Dana Sanchez, a student advocate who attends the Live Oaks Career Campus, says the program helps develop potential future leaders, and she has personally

gained a lot from the two years she spent as a student advocate. "Being a student advocate gave me real-world experience with many different avenues, including marketing, public relations and networking, along with community service," said Sanchez. Not only did she get to share with others how passionate she felt about the education she received at Great Oaks, she believes that it also helped prepare her to go on to Eastern Michigan University, where she plans to major in business

administration and psychology.

The advocates also act as the execution team, which includes helping develop timelines, calendars and materials for projects and initiatives. In addition, they become liaisons in the community, and with the tools and knowledge they are provided as part of the program, they use word of mouth to generate awareness of, and support for, the advocate program.

Karie Emery, career specialist with the Laurel Oaks Career Campus, says,

PHOTO COURTESY OF GREAT OAKS CAREER CAMPUSES



▲ Kelly Ewing of Live Oaks, winner of the "Truth Is..." video contest, stands with Live Oaks Dean of Instruction Dan Cox, instructor Adam Schlosser, and Assistant Dean Joe Moon.

"Great Oaks advocates are enthusiastic students who want to ensure that the truth is known about career and technical education and all it really has to offer." Another way that Great Oaks is getting out the truth about its programs is through a competition called "The Truth Is..." Students can win \$50 by writing about their experiences, creating a video, taking photos or creating a graphic that "gives the truth about Great Oaks."

Just implementing a program is not enough. It is also important to evaluate what elements work best, and according to Weidlich, the blog was the least successful of the three activities. As he notes, "The contest was a success, generating a number of outstanding essays and several videos about life at Great Oaks from a student perspective, but the biggest success was the Facebook page (www.facebook.com/truthaboutgreatoaks). This has become a forum for students to talk about what they're doing in their programs and on campus—and a place for future students to ask questions and get information. We've even started getting posts from alumni who share their experiences."

Weidlich says their student advocates are reporting that classmates are now

approaching them to ask how they too can become advocates. Student advocate Rebecca Kinman, who attends the Laurel Oaks Career Campus, has this to say: "Being an advocate is incredible. You have your own opinion and insight into the Great Oaks Career Campuses that you can share with others and be heard. You can tell about experiences and encourage others to do the same. It's worthwhile."

Another student advocate, Emily Mason, who attends the Scarlet Oaks Career Campus, found that she learned more about labs other than the one in which her studies were focused—as well as learning about the students in those other labs. As she explains, "I learned more about the school and found those who come here to be more than just people who are looking to take an easy way—and I learned just how open and different people are when you put them into doing what they love. I'm glad I joined the program, if only to be able to see how happy people become with a lab they adore."

The answer Great Oaks provides for its students in response to the question of why they should become advocates: "You are our greatest asset and biggest fan. You have the power to bring to life—through

your stories and experience—the real benefits of choosing Great Oaks to reach long-term success. You have the power and influence to rally your fellow students and community to help Great Oaks get the recognition it deserves for making success a reality for so many."

That is a great message for the students of Great Oaks—and for all students who are finding success through CTE. And now that message may find new avenues to reach the community.

"The project has been so successful that staff members who were originally skeptical are now working on similar plans for parent advocates—those who can talk with and answer questions for parents of prospective students," says Weidlich. "This begins in the fall with videotaped conversations with parents, and will hopefully grow from there."

One Program's Story of Advocacy

Joseph Wilkins was a finalist for the 2010 ACTE Teacher of the Year Award, and that's not surprising, considering what he accomplished as an advocate for the automotive technician program at Paris Gibson Educational Center in Great Falls, Montana, a program he conceived with the help of local auto dealers. As a shop teacher, he found that there was a need for a longer sequence of study, a better facility and newer technology. "That's when we rolled up our shirtsleeves and came up with a plan," Wilkins says.

He and his colleagues took that plan to the community, making a case to the Chamber of Commerce and every other community organization that would listen. They also contacted corporations ranging from Microsoft to AC Delco to local dealerships. In the end, they received a grant from Microsoft for their technology needs, they got money from Perkins funding, and the school district provided \$100,000. They used the money to remodel an existing building—a school that had been closed—and the result was a modern useable facility. Another source

of funding was the “Buy a Bay” initiative, in which the school district sold bays in the school facility to local dealerships. The dealerships’ signs were displayed in the bays they bought.

The program was also opened up to students from outlying rural areas where access to such an innovative and comprehensive program wasn’t available. That’s another positive aspect of what was achieved at the school—it now serves even more students and has become a model for other schools. Another issue Wilkins faced when he came on board was the loss of an articulation agreement with a local college, but that was resolved when the school developed such an agreement with Montana State University Northern. “They are the best automotive program in our region,” says Wilkins. “They have a well-respected program, and I’m happy to be involved with them.”

The efforts of Wilkins and his colleagues have led to benefits for other programs in the state, since additional Montana high schools have now entered into articulation agreements with the university. Wilkins serves as a model for CTE advocacy, and says it is important to him to “really try to look out for CTE programs.” His advice is, “Get involved with the community and stay involved. We still stop by weekly into dealerships to make sure we’re still meeting their needs.”

While it may have taken a lot of effort, Wilkins says it was a great experience, and when he sees how the students treat the facility, it is truly rewarding. For those embarking on similar efforts, he says, “Get in touch with your students and find out what they need. Get in touch with the community and find out what they need. Then find an innovative way to bring the two together.”

Active Association Advocacy

CTE educators across the country are actively advocating for their profession through ACTE, their national organization, and through their state associations.

For example, ACTE Arizona (ACTEAZ) provides its members with tools and information to help them advocate for CTE with state and national policymakers. Much of that material comes from the ACTE Web site, where it is provided to educators across the country, and ACTE urges them to utilize it in actively and effectively promoting CTE whenever and wherever possible.

ACTEAZ has urged action by its members when faced with threats on the national level, such as cuts to Perkins and Tech Prep, and it has provided members with instructions on how to take action to prevent such cuts. On the state level, ACTEAZ has worked with the Arizona Department of Education to ensure that there are not roadblocks that prohibit qualified teachers from other states, or qualified individuals from industry, from entering the teaching profession.

It has also worked with the state legislature on issues of funding and on changing the wording in certain legislation. For example, in one piece of legislation the association worked to have language changed to allow career and technical schools to rent or lease satellite facilities in the evenings, summer or weekends to run central campus programs.

As John Mulcahy, who is the ACTEAZ lobbyist representative, said, “You can’t influence a conversation if you aren’t part of it. Our goal is to be part of conversations impacting CTE at the district, state and national levels.”

Members of ACTEAZ have attended the ACTE National Policy Seminar and gone to Capitol Hill to meet with the two Senators and eight Representatives from Arizona, or their aides. They presented each of their congressional members with information and statistical data on CTE. Among the other activities cited on its Web site: ACTEAZ continuously works to disseminate the latest legislative information regarding CTE from the national and state levels, and members share with their state legislators “the great learning

opportunities that are occurring in our schools regarding career and technical education.” ACTEAZ also invites legislators to come see these opportunities firsthand by visiting the students and teachers, and its members follow up with the legislators to arrange such visits whenever possible.

On its Web site, ACTEAZ provides samples for its members to use to invite legislators, business representatives or other stakeholders to visit their schools during CTE Month. ACTEAZ Executive Director Pam Ferguson calls this “the cornerstone of a lot of what we do for members.” (To view these samples, go to www.acteaz.org/index, access the CTE Resources page, and scroll down to the end.)

It is important for all career tech educators to become involved in their state and national associations. As Mulcahy points out, “We all know that volume matters. When we speak to state and national elected officials they often want to know how many people we represent.”

The effort in Arizona has paid off, and although Mulcahy notes there were some significant setbacks in the legislative session that recently concluded, he adds, “We have considerable historical success in the legislature and through the state board of education.”

The message our outstanding state associations such as ACTEAZ constantly share with their members is to get involved. As Mulcahy says, “We like to remind everyone that advocacy is like the lottery: ‘You can’t win if you don’t play.’ We want to be players. In addition, we don’t want to be victims. We want to be part of the discussion and part of the fight that ensures the continuance and continual improvement of public education.” **T**

Susan Reese

is a *Techniques* contributing writer. She can be contacted at susan@printmanagementinc.com.

